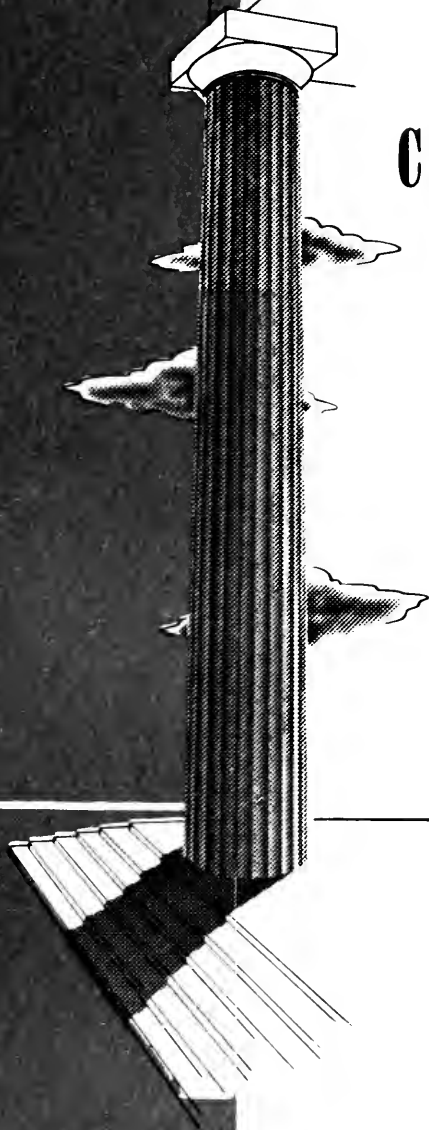


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# The History of Caps and Gowns

by

NATALIA M. BELTING



ILLINOIS HISTORICAL SURVEY





# *The History of Caps and Gowns*

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Natalia M. Belting

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## **THE PARADE OF THE MIDDLE AGES**

**I**t happens every spring. At least every spring wherever there's a college or university. Sometimes it happens more often. It happens whenever an academic procession winds its slow and dignified way across a campus. Parents and friends and the just-plain-curious line the sidewalks watching the faculty march by with their gowns billowing behind them and their hoods flashing brilliant colors against the somber black. They watch as the graduates go by with their mortar boards set at crazy angles on the backs of their heads. Then the questions start coming. Why did Professor Smith have red velvet on his gown and that professor next to him blue velvet? Why do they call that cape a hood? Why are the sleeves on those gowns cut off so funny, not big and full like on the other gowns?

Usually nobody knows, though you may hear all kinds of answers. As a matter of fact, it is a parade of the Middle Ages.

For caps and gowns, in all the assorted cuts and styles and colors, are actually an inheritance from the university scholar of four and five and even six hundred years ago. That's not to say they're just the same. Probably the scholar of the fourteenth century wouldn't even recognize his everyday costume in today's academic regalia, and yet it was out of his ordinary dress that the cap and gown did evolve.

In those early days of the universities, the ordinary dress of the scholar, whether he was a student or a teacher, was the dress of a cleric, or a clerk, as he was commonly called. For a very good reason, too, because, with few exceptions the medieval scholar had taken Minor Orders at least, and had made certain vows, and perhaps been tonsured, and had some connection with a church or a monastery which provided him with what amounted to a scholarship or a fellowship for his university studies. So he wore a long gown, and a long sleeveless tunic over it, and when the weather was cold, a long, full cloak to which a shoulder-length cape with a hood was attached.



At first the clerk's dress wasn't a great deal different from the everyday dress of somebody who wasn't a clerk. Then something began to happen to European life. A middle class was rising in the towns, and their trading caravans and ships were bringing them increasing wealth and making them independent of their feudal overlords. And if a man had money, he liked to show it in the clothes he wore. He had his gowns and his tunics and his cloaks fashioned of fine silks and damasks and wools from the East, and his hoods lined with miniver instead of rabbit's fur, and he lengthened the toes of his shoes until sometimes he had to tie the points around his legs to keep from tripping over them. The nobility began to complain that you couldn't tell a free-born member of the aristocracy from these unfree, "new rich" townspeople. Something had to be done about it. The something was sumptuary legislation issued by the kings, restricting the use of certain furs and precious stones to members of the feudal society, and decreeing that a man's rank must determine the amount of money he could pay for the material that went into his clothes.

Obviously, when that was happening outside the university, there were bound to be similar situations developing among the scholars. After all, few peasants' sons went to universities. And a great many belonged to well-to-do and wealthy families, who could afford to dress their sons well and in attire that was somehow not what one would consider appropriate for a humble cleric.

As a result, the first university regulations regarding dress among the students and faculty were concerned not with the style and cut of their gowns, but with the cost. In 1314 the rector and administrators of the University of Toulouse in France<sup>1</sup> felt themselves compelled

"to set on affixed price for the said clothes and garments, in order that by a fixed price and tariff this reprehensible superfluity of clothing may be checked and an approved mediocrity in respect to costume be maintained in the said university..."

## They did this

"since superfluity of clothing in clerics is reprov'd by the haly fathers... , since too, because of the superfluity of clothing which clerics and scholars at the University have hitherta been wont to make...many, abhorring the said superfluity of clothing and not unjustly fearing the immoderate cost of the same, have refused to attend the said university and have gone to others which were not so expensive, while many who came to the said university have withdrawn from the university because of the cost of the same clothing."

1. Thorndike, Lynn; *University Records and Life in the Middle Ages*, New York, 1944, pp 150-154

This regulation affected not only the students, but "all masters, licentiates and bachelors" who must "wear their garments of the said price everywhere through the city or in the city and in the buildings of the city outside their lodgings." Those scholars who might have clothing given them by bishops or friends or relatives among the nobility had permission to wear this clothing "wherever they are outside academic functions. But at academic functions, as in classes and at the university mass and wherever the university goes or meets, there they shall wear or be required to wear garments of the cloth and price stated."



In some of the German universities the statutes specifically prohibited scholars and faculty from indulging in such high fashions as the long-pointed shoes, trunkhose, puffed and slashed

sleeves, and parti-colored garments, but even then no single academic costume was prescribed. Occasionally students of a college adopted a special color or "livery". At the University of Beauvais, for instance, the livery was blue. The "Queen's men" at Oxford wore blood-red; other Oxford undergraduates favored green or blue.

Color did have some symbolism in the medieval university though there was no uniformity from one university to another. An unknown philosopher in the middle of the fourteenth century, commenting on the University of Paris, pointed out<sup>2</sup> that the University "dispenses distinct costumes" to its four faculties. Those in the liberal arts "go forth in black round copes (cloaks) of noble brunet or of fine perse lined with fur. . . . Their costume befits lords of liberal philosophy, because it is the nature of black to collect the sight."

The physicians and medical men "rejoiced in ordinary copes of brunet somewhat brighter than the artists and more nearly red like the color of thick rouge. And in the closeness of this

2. Ibid., 213-215.

color to true brunet is figured the connection between these faculties, since he is a poor physician who knows no logic or who has no recourse to natural philosophy.

The jurists at the University had "scholastic copes" of scarlet and of a fiery red, since the red color signifies an inflamed mind." The theologians wore the garments prescribed by their Order, "or.....any simple garb of humble color.....to denote the humble and innocent preaching of this science."

The definite association of certain colors with certain ranks and degrees and even with certain faculties was to be a much later development, and one which was to be standardized only in the United States. In 1895 the Intercollegiate Commission drew up a code which was subsequently adopted by 95% of the American colleges and universities and which besides regulating the cut and style and materials of the gowns, prescribed the colors which were to represent the different fields of learning. White taken from the white fur trimming of the Oxford and Cambridge B. A. hoods, was assigned to arts and letters. Red, one of the

traditional colors of the church, went to theology. Royal purple, a color associated with kings and therefore with their judicial power, became the symbol for law. Green, the color of medicinal herbs, was adopted for medicine, and olive, because it was so close to green, was given to pharmacy. Blue, for centuries the color associated with wisdom and truth, became the color for philosophy, while the Oxford pink was retained for music. Golden yellow, standing for the wealth which scientific research has produced, was assigned to the sciences.

And russet brown, the color of the dress of the ancient English foresters, was given to forestry. The complete list of colors and the fields of learning they represent are as follows:

White - Arts and Letters  
Red - Theology  
Royal Purple - Law  
Brown - Fine Arts  
Orange - Engineering



*Modern Bachelor hood*

Lilac - Dentistry  
Green - Medicine  
Blue - Philosophy  
Yellow - Science  
Pink - Music  
Olive - Pharmacy  
Russet - Forestry  
Copper - Economics  
Dark Crimson - Humanities  
Drab - Commerce,  
Accountancy  
Sea Green - Optometry  
Nile Green - Chiropody  
Grey - Veterinary Science  
Lemon - Library Science  
Light Blue - Education  
Silver Grey - Speech (Oratory)  
Salmon - Public Health  
Sage Green - Physical Education  
Maize - Agriculture

But to get along with the evolution of the modern cap and gown . . . . . everybody agrees it comes largely from the clerical dress of the 13th and 14th centuries. And hardly anybody agrees with anybody else as to exactly how the cassock, the tabard, and the cappa became the modern gown; there's not quite so much disagreement over the evolution of the mortar board, and none at all about the academic hood.

The cassock of the medieval scholar was a long, somewhat fitted garment, with long and usually narrow sleeves. Over this he frequently wore a tabard, a narrow, sleeveless gown or tunic



1482

*Narrow sleeved gown with  
skull cap, hood  
(sleeves lined with fur)*

which slipped on over his head, and was sometimes belted and sometimes not. The cappa or cloak with the hood attached was worn indoors as well as out-of-doors.

Out of these garments by the end of the 16th century in England a distinctive academic costume evolved. The cassock became a sleeveless undergarment. The tabard was slit up the front, and had sleeves added to it, sleeves not necessarily narrow as they had been on the cassock, but full and flowing, or long and trailing with slashes cut in them after the secular fashion from the first days of the universities, in the 12th century, and they were very much in fashion in the days of Henry VIII of



England when Oxford and Cambridge were first prescribing a definite academic costume. These sleeves sometimes were so long that slits had to be cut in them, far from the end for the arm and the hand. And probably it was not only scholars who found that such sleeves made excellent pockets for everything from notes



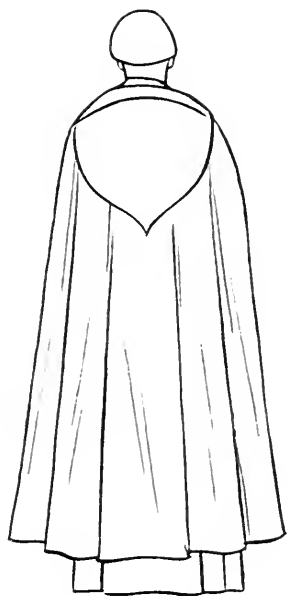
*Brimless cap with earflaps,  
fur lined, pleated robe*

to lunch. Modern candidates for the master's degree who have discovered the same thing about their sleeves have, after all, made no new discovery!

As for the hood, originally it was a head covering worn by everyone, priest and layman, aristocrat and commoner. A hood was no mark of distinction, but with the enactment of sumptuary laws by the kings and similar regulations by university authorities, the materials that went into the making of the hood did come to



*B. A., Oxford, 1563*

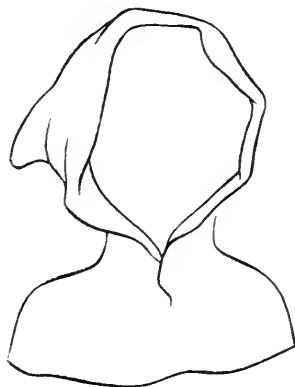


*Doctor hood with peak (liripipe)  
still in design*

with its peak or liripipe, hanging far down behind. At Oxford and Cambridge, the peaks on the graduates' hoods were shorter than those on the undergraduates. In 1489, Oxford undergraduates were prohibited altogether from wearing

denote a man's rank in society or his standing in the university. In the English universities, bachelors of all the faculties were allowed to line their winter hoods with badger's fur or lamb's wool. Masters and regents were allowed to use miniver or something equally expensive.

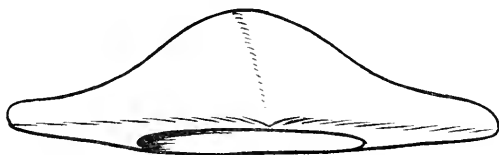
When the skull cap was adopted, the hood continued to be worn, thrown over the shoulder,



*Combined hood and cape*

hoods, and between that year and the end of the next century, the wearing of the hood came to be a mark of the attainment of a degree.

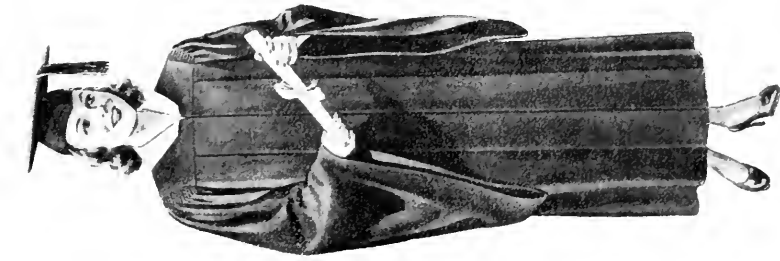
As the hood disappeared for a head-covering, a close-fitting skull cap, or a round cap with a point or tuft in the center took its place. Gradually the latter cap assumed a square shape



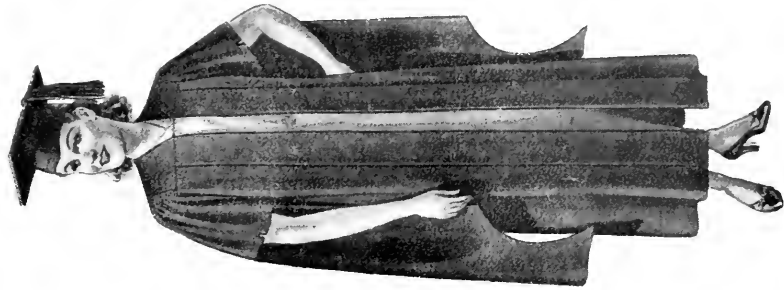
*Stiffening added to mortarboard*

as folds of material were added to it until it became the biretta, and was adopted by masters as their distinctive badge. Doctors of some of the faculties adopted red or violet birettas also.

Then during the days of the Reformation in England, more and more material was added to the biretta, and it began to droop over the face until a piece of board had to be stuffed inside to stiffen it. Soon the top became a square of cardboard with a skull cap fastened to it, the tuft became a tassel, and the modern mortar board was in existence.



BACHELOR'S GOWN



MASTER'S GOWN



DOCTOR'S GOWN

From a traditional background covering hundreds of years, the present academic costume has evolved. With the adoption of the Intercollegiate Code in 1895, a definite pattern was established to make possible the recognition of degrees conferred by American colleges and universities.

Collegiate maintains a complete library of correct and current information on authentic caps, gowns, and hoods to insure you of academic apparel in the proper style and colors. A complete range of sizes in Doctor, Master, and Bachelor caps and gowns as well as hoods representing degrees of all schools in the United States are available for rental. Each garment is thoroughly sterilized, cleaned, pressed, and conveniently packaged for shipment directly to you.

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